

# Frost at Sixty-Seven

A WITNESS TREE. By Robert Frost.  
New York: Henry Holt & Co. 1942.  
91 pp. \$2.

Reviewed by STEPHEN VINCENT BENÉT

THIS is a beautiful book, serene, observing, and passionate. It has the characteristic music made out of common speech which is one of Mr. Frost's great gifts—no matter where you met a poem like "Come In" you would know it was by Mr. Frost—it has the Yankee taste for philosophic laconics which makes him one of our most indigenous products—but, most of all, it has a lyric force and intensity that shows how a mind may know age without losing youth. Mr. Frost has never written any better poems than some of those in this book. Nor are any of these merely repetitions and rephrasings—as sometimes happens to the later work of a man who has done a good deal of work. There are poems, to be sure, that could fit in earlier books—"To a Young Wretch," for instance, with its very Frostian, "It is your Christmases against my woods"—"Wilful Homing," with its characteristic first line, "It is getting dark and time he drew to a house." But the brief run of notes called "Carpe Diem"—well, there it is, quite perfect in technique, quite different in technique from any of the others, and quite entirely his. Nor will you write a poem like "The Subverted Flower" by being young, old, middle-aged, modern, classical, American, English, or what have you—but when the lightning strikes.

Reviewing such a book is no easy task. What are you going to say of a man who, at sixty-seven, produces work that is both firmer in texture and fresher in impact than that of so many of his juniors? You can recognize the tart individual flavor in such lines as the closing lines of "A Considerable Speck":

I have a mind myself and recognize  
Mind when I meet with it in any  
guise.  
No one can know how glad I am to  
find  
On any sheet the least display of  
mind.

and wonder, uneasily, if there is a certain advice there for reviewers as well as animalculae. You can read such lines as those which conclude a poem named "The Most of It" and note the precise description, the rising music, so strongly and effortlessly handled till the inevitable close. Or, you can take such a poem as "I Could Give All to Time" and look at it.

To Time it never seems that he is  
brave  
To set himself against the peaks of  
snow

To lay them level with the running  
wave,  
Nor is he overjoyed when they lie  
low  
But only grave, contemplative and  
grave.

What now is inland shall be ocean  
isle,  
Then eddies playing round a sunken  
reef  
Like the curl at the corner of a  
smile;  
And I could share Time's lack of joy  
or grief  
At such a planetary change of style.  
I could give all to Time except—  
except  
What I myself have held. But why  
declare  
The things forbidden that while the  
Customs slept  
I have crossed to Safety with? For  
I am There  
And what I would not part with I  
have kept.

And that is in the great manner of English verse—that is all. It is going to last, it is going to resist breakage. It has Mr. Frost's particular signature on it—note the tenth line. But it goes beyond particular signatures.

There are other such poems in the book—such poems as "The Wind and

the Rain" in one vein, as "Of the Stones of the Place" and "Trespass" in another. There is a narrative poem which isn't a narrative poem but a philosophic one, doesn't succeed entirely, and yet has half-a-dozen lines which might have come out of "Kilmeny." There is "The Literate Farmer and the Planet Venus" which I can't admire as much as some people do and at least one quatrain "On Our Sympathy with the Under Dog" which I can't admire at all. In other words, out of forty-two poems not all are successful. But the ones that are, by themselves, would make a reputation, though Mr. Frost had written no others.

I hold your doctrine of Memento  
Mori  
And were an epitaph to be my story  
I'd have a short one ready for my  
own.  
I would have written of me on my  
stone:  
I had a lover's quarrel with the  
world.

So Mr. Frost at the end of "The Lesson for Today." The statement is very like him and we are all the richer for the quarrel. For here is a book to read, a book to remember, and a book that will be part of our inheritance.

## The Florentine Twilight Falls on Lincoln Square

By Horace Gregory

AS though I stood at the center of the world,  
Gray walls of stone and sky circled the figure  
Of Dante cast in bronze, the laurelled head  
Among thorned branches of a winter tree:  
"Speak to it," said a voice,  
"Speak to that stern, sad, staring image of a face  
Which seems to lean out of another time  
To this late afternoon, the more than human  
Pity and grace as though its light had poured  
From sunless skies into this wind-swept place  
Over gray street, park bench and city square."

"Speak to it," said the voice, "even at the hour  
When the clock's eye opens upon men at war;  
These streets, unlighted windows and black boughs  
Are not unfamiliar to its quiet gaze . . .  
Where the ground trembled and grasses wept  
It has mused upon lost friends and enemies,  
It has witnessed and foreseen  
Blood on this earth that feeds the roots of trees,  
And beyond the earth into another season  
Of day beyond Winter, Spring, Summer and Fall  
Held in the golden, dream-filled look of a young girl,  
Beyond the passion of the grave,  
Beyond the last embrace of death, or birth, or love."

As I heard the voice, I saw the dark face vanish,  
Yet knew its presence in the darker air,  
The hand-clasped book, the cloak, the bough, the laurel:  
Even though earth fail us and the city gone,  
We shall know that figure and its fiery star  
Floating behind the ceaseless sun and moon.

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# Lonely Eminence

*BE ANGRY AT THE SUN AND OTHER POEMS.* By Robinson Jeffers. New York: Random House, 1941. 156 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by R. ELLIS ROBERTS

WITH the possible exception of Robert Frost, Robinson Jeffers is to a European the most American of contemporary poets. He is in the tradition of Thoreau, of Melville, of Whitman—men who never rejected or imitated European thought and way of life, though they may, at times, claim to transcend it by virtue of a hopeful Americanism. I know that many critics will boggle at the association of Jeffers and hope; but that is only because hope has been too easily confused with a facile optimism, even with the vulgar acceptance of the advertiser's motto "Boost, don't knock!"

Jeffers is no booster for human nature—nor was Jonathan Edwards, nor was, fundamentally, Abraham Lincoln. That one looks for analogues to Jeffers among men who were not poets is evidence of his lonely eminence as a poet. In this new volume, which contains some of his finest and most prophetic work, I am reminded of no other poetry except the later Yeats, another lonely and undeceived poet of our day. When I say "undeceived" I mean Jeffers is never a slave to the popular cant of the market-place or the literary salon. I think he is sometimes self-deceived. When he writes in "Battle":

It would be better for men  
To be few and live apart, where none  
could infect another;  
then slowly the sanity of field and  
mountain  
And the cold ocean and glittering  
stars might enter their minds

I question immediately, Why think valley and mountain, the heavens or the unpredictable ocean to be saner than man's soul? Is the Amazon or the Mississippi less turbulent and tormented than the difficult, intimate flow of the blood to and from the heart? Does not the blood of man control and color his vision of the natural world? But a poet has a right to his own philosophy, and Robinson Jeffers is, since Lucretius, the greatest poet to accept, in certain moods, a theory of pantheism; though often his view of nature, though it is starker, is not far from the more personal theory of Wordsworth.

The most remarkable work in this book is "The Bowl of Blood." It is a masque of Hitler, and shows him consulting a witch who foretells the future, summoning for him the spirits of Frederick the Great, of Napoleon, and

of a friend who was killed in the last war. It is a tense, taut piece of work, packed with imaginative understanding and a rare quality of vision. In it, as in so many of these poems, Jeffers's profound pity for humanity is nobly, sternly expressed. The core of it can perhaps be found in the second Masker's answer to the question "How can one man gather all power? How does a man dare?"

Listen: power is a great hollow spirit  
That needs a center.  
It chooses one man almost at random  
And clouds him and clots around him  
and possesses him.  
Listen: the man does not have power.  
Power has the man.

In this Robinson Jeffers comes very near the traditional Catholic doctrine of possession; and in another poem, "Nerves," he asks

Or is it that we really feel  
A gathering in the air of something  
that hates  
Humanity; and in that storm-light  
see  
Ourselves with too much pity and  
the others too clearly?

Robinson Jeffers has always felt that sinister, envious, encompassing power; and who dare say now, looking at the history of our time, that his vision has been too terrible?

I must not leave this book without calling attention to the tender, pitiful poems in it. They have a dignity and a grave beauty he has never exceeded—the personal "For Una," the lovely memorial for a bull-dog, the poignant beauty of "Two Christmas Cards." No one from the island can read without emotion the first of these with its nostalgic and hopeful refrain:



Robinson Jeffers

Lichen and stone the gables  
Of Kelmscott watch the young  
Thames:  
England dies in the storm,  
Dies to survive, and form  
Another and another  
Of the veils under veils of the vanished  
Englands.

The long narrative poem "Mara" has much of his old skill as a storyteller—here he has no rival except John Masefield—but it has not quite the force or the pace he can give to a story; and there is uncertainty as well as subtlety in his handling of the "deceived and jealous man." The whole book will confirm any intelligent reader that here is one of the few major poets now writing in English, a man who has his narrownesses and his obliquities but who is fit to sit down, as Yeats desired to sit, with "Landor and John Donne," for he has clung, as they, obstinately to his creed:

Yet I believe truth is more beautiful  
Than all the lies, and God than all  
false gods.

## The Sheathed Anger

By Dilys Bennett Laing

ALL who love each other  
walk in the green woods  
delicately away  
from the cruel sportsmen.

They do not look for death.  
They look for life  
and they wear trees of horn  
proudly like crowns  
on their balanced heads.

Peace is their food,  
and grass and all quiet things  
their grace.  
But hard in the herd  
as veins of diamond  
the unreckoning valor  
of the angry buck.